

## NEWS

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**Contact:** Dave Fotsch, Public Information Officer  
(208) 327-8639 / Cell: (208) 871-1712  
Sally Kane, Dental Hygienist  
(208) 861-6185

### ORAL HEALTH LINKED TO HEALTHY BABIES

Recent studies indicate a link between periodontal disease and adverse pregnancy outcomes. Women with periodontal disease have a three-to-sevenfold increase in preterm, low-birthweight babies. Children born too early and weighing too little often have serious medical problems requiring expensive treatments. The Central District Health Department is leading the way to better dental health and healthier babies through a new program, the **Idaho Oral Health Project for Pregnant Women**.

Periodontal disease is perhaps the most common chronic, infectious disease known to humans. Most often the disease presents as gingivitis, which is characterized by inflammation of the gums. Gingivitis can usually be reversed with brushing, flossing and professional cleaning. Untreated, gingivitis can progress to periodontitis, an infection of the teeth, gum and bones that is irreversible without special treatment.

Oral disease may be responsible for as many as 18% of the 250,000 preterm, low-birthweight infants born in the U.S. each year, according to the National Institutes of Health. That's a significant number when you consider that low birthweight remains the leading cause of death for infants during the first year of life. In Idaho 10.6% of births are preterm and 6.5% are low birth weight (2005).

The financial impact of low-birthweight babies can be shown through Medicaid payments. In 2004 Idaho Medicaid paid more than \$17 million in medical care for low-birthweight babies during the first year of life – 10 times more than the medical costs for normal birth weight infants over the same period. Average cost of medical care for a

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## ORAL HEALTH – ADD ONE

non-low-birth weight baby was \$3,499. The average medical costs for a low-birth weight baby amounted to \$35,776.

According to the 2004 Idaho Pregnancy Risk Assessment Tracking System (PRATS), 61% of Idaho mothers did not receive dental care during pregnancy. In fact, 59% reported that their health care provider did not tell them about the importance of getting regular dental care during pregnancy.

For these reasons and many more, the Idaho Oral Health Project for Pregnant Women was created to raise awareness among pregnant women, medical and dental professionals about the connection between good oral health and healthy babies.

Over the past few months Central District Health has worked directly with dental and medical offices to inform the professional community about promoting good oral health for pregnant women. Now attention is turning to pregnant women. Medical and dental offices throughout Ada County will be receiving packets containing brochures for pregnant women and information sheets for the doctors, dentists and assistants in these offices. To further target key populations, physicians will be able to refer their low-income Medicaid patients to Terry Reilly Health Services (TRHS) clinic in Boise where they will get priority treatment within three business days. TRHS has set up a hotline for physicians and pregnant women to call to set up an appointment – 331-5049.

Each of the seven health districts in Idaho received \$5,000 from the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare to begin outreach efforts on pregnancy and oral health. Central District Health received additional funding for Ada County through a Healthy Communities Access Program grant, funded in part by the Health Resources and Services Administration. The additional funds have allowed Central District Health to expand their outreach efforts and launch a media campaign to raise awareness of the issues associated with periodontal health and healthy babies.

For more information on the Central District Health Department Oral Health program call 375-5211 or visit the CDHD website at [www.cdhd.idaho.gov](http://www.cdhd.idaho.gov).

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**Editor's Note:** For information on the Terry Reilly Health Services dental clinic call Dr. Dan Watts at 899-3054.